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ABSTRACT

Despite little empirical evidence, many psychotherapists believe that parental alcoholism inevitably results in codependence among alcoholics' offspring. The present study examines the hypothesis that intervening factors, such as abusive parenting, mediate the development of codependence. To test this premise, 247 undergraduates completed questionnaires assessing codependence, parental alcoholism, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. Ninety-five percent of the subjects were Anglo-American and 73 percent were female. Parental alcoholism correlated significantly with emotional abuse and physical abuse but not sexual abuse; the correlations were low enough to suggest that parental alcoholism is not always associated with abusive parenting practices. A multiple regression revealed that emotional and sexual abuse accounted for all of the explainable variance on the codependence measure (R=.47). Results support the thesis that codependence results from more specific events, such as abusive parenting, and not from the general occurrence of parental alcoholism. This may explain why many children of alcoholics do not display maladaptive levels of codependence. Rather, children who are exposed to emotional and sexual abuse, with or without alcoholism, are the group who appear to be at the greatest risk for codependence. (Author/RJM)

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Parental Abuse as a Mediator of Codependence among Alcoholics' Offspring

Abstract

Despite little empirical evidence, many psychotherapists believe that parental alcoholism inevitably results in codependence among alcoholics' offspring. The present study examines the hypothesis that intervening factors, such as abusive parenting, mediate the development of codependence. To test this hypothesis, 247 undergraduates completed questionnaires assessing codependence, parental alcoholism, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. A multiple regression revealed that emotional and sexual abuse accounted for all of the explainable variance on the codependence measure (R=.47). Results support the hypothesis that codependence results from more specific events, such as abusive parenting, and not from the general occurrence of parental alcoholism.

Parental Abuse as a Mediator of Codependence among Alcoholic Offspring

During the past 15 years there has been a proliferation of articles, books and treatment programs aimed at family members of alcoholics. A common assumption in this literature is that children of alcoholics develop a disorder that is popularly called codependence (Cermak, 1986). Characteristics commonly associated with codependence include the desire to control oneself and others, taking responsibility for meeting the needs of others, difficulty with intimacy and separation, and over-involvement with disordered persons (Cermak, 1991). According to theorists, these varied characteristics result from trying to hide and deny the family secret of alcoholism while also trying to control the behavior of the alcoholic parent (Brown, 1988). In the process of coping with these events, the child becomes skilled at relating to and taking care of a chemically dependent person. As a result of their familiarity and comfort with this role, the child will gravitate toward similar relationships in adulthood (Lyon & Greenberg, 1991). Many theorists believe that these codependent characteristics are common to all children of alcoholics (Black, Bucky, & Wilder-Padilla, 1986; Cermak, 1986; Wegenscheider-Cruse 1984; Whitfield, 1984).

Despite the popularity and almost unquestioning acceptance of the concept of codependence (Asher & Brissett, 1988; Burk & Sher, 1990), very few studies have examined whether codependent characteristics are more prevalent among children of alcoholics. Studies which have examined this question have not found support for the hypothesis that all, or even a majority, of children or spouses of alcoholics display elevated levels of codependence (O'brien & Gaborit, 1992; Roehling & Edmiston, under review; Roehling, Fowler, Gaumond, & Dancz, 1992). Rather, when elevations are found, they are small enough to be of questionable clinical significance. This suggests that there are intervening factors that influence whether parental alcoholism will lead to codependence.

Alcoholism can take many forms and there are a variety of negative behaviors that are associated with the abuse of alcohol. Rather than being a reaction to alcoholism in general, codependent characteristics may result from more specific parental behaviors that are associated with alcoholism. In particular, parental alcohol abuse has been associated with higher rates of emotional abuse (Reich, Earls, & Powell, 1988), physical abuse (Black, Bucky, & Wilder-Padilla, 1986; Kantor & Straus, 1990; Reich, Earls, & Powell, 1988; Winokur & Clayton, 1968), and sexual abuse (Winokur & Clayton, 1968). If codependent characteristics develop as a result of these

behaviors, then only a subset of children of alcoholics would have an increased incidence of codependent characteristics.

The goal of the present study was to examine how parental alcohol abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse relate to codependence. In order to explore this relationship, questionnaires assessing codependence, parental alcohol abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse was administered to a group of college students. We hypothesize that there will be a strong relationship between abusive parental behaviors and codependence, which will mediate any relationship between parental alcoholism and codependence.

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 247 undergraduate students who were enrolled in an Introduction to Psychology course. Participants received extra credit for their involvement in the study. Seventy-three percent of the subjects were female, 95% were Anglo-American.

Procedure

Participants completed a battery of questionnaires. The data collection occurred during three large data collections. These collections occurred during a time separate from their class period.

Measures

The Codependent Questionnaire (CdQ). The CdQ is an 86 item Likert scale questionnaire, which yields a total score and fourteen subscale scores. These subscale scores reflect the dimensions of codependence as outlined by Cermak (1986). The CdQ has demonstrated acceptable levels of internal consistency and test-retest reliability; and has proven to be a valid measure of what therapists consider codependence (Roehling, Fowler, Gaumond, & Dancz, 1992; Roehling & Gaumond, 1990).

Children of Alcoholics Screening Test (CAST). The CAST (Jones, 1982) is a 30 item questionnaire which assesses the presence of parental alcoholism. The measure has demonstrated acceptable levels of reliability and validity (Jones, 1982; Pilat & Jones, 1984).

Emotional Abuse. In order to measure emotional abuse, subjects rated, on a five-point Likert scale, the frequency with which the following incidents had occurred: "As a child, it seemed like nothing I did was good enough", "My parents told me that I was worthless or a failure", and "As a child, how often did your parents yell at you?". The emotional abuse scale was calculated by summing subjects' responses to those three items.

Physical Abuse. Participants rated, on a 5 point Likert scale, the frequency with which they were spanked, struck, bruised, hit with an object,

or confined in a small place by their parents. Responses to these questions were summed.

Sexual Abuse. Participants were asked whether any of the following behaviors had been perpetrated against them without their consent: fondling, touching of their genitalia, forced sexual activity, or forced sexual intercourse. Each affirmative response to any of the above questions resulted in a increment in one's sexual abuse score by one. Additionally, participants were asked to identify the perpetrator of the sexual abuse.

Results

Twenty-eight (11%) of the 247 students reported being the child of an alcoholic (See Table 2 for means and standard deviations of the parental alcoholism and parental abuse measures). In order to examine the relationship between the variables, each variable was correlated with each other variable (See Table 1). Codependence was significantly correlated with each measure of abuse: parental alcoholism (r=.18), physical abuse (r=.27), emotional abuse (r=.44), and sexual abuse (r=.26). In addition, parental alcoholism correlated significantly with emotional abuse (r=.22) and physical abuse (r=.18), but not with sexual abuse (r=.08). It was not surprising that parental alcohol abuse was not related to sexual abuse. Of the 43 participants who reported experiencing some form of sexual abuse, only seven reported the

abuse was perpetrated by a family member. Therefore, the measure of sexual abuse largely reflects abuse that occurred outside of the family.

A multiple regression was used to examine the relative contribution of parental alcoholism and the different measures of parental abuse upon codependence (See Table 2). Emotional abuse was entered into the equation first because it was believed to occur in conjunction with the other abusive behaviors. We wanted to examine whether other forms of abuse could explain the remaining variance in codependence scores once the effects of emotional abuse had been removed. In the first step, emotional abuse correlated .43 with codependence. A step-wise procedure was used for the second step, because our theory did not specify the order of entry for the remaining variables. In this next step, sexual abuse was extracted, raising the multiple correlation to .46. Following the removal of sexual abuse, no other variables met the criteria for removal. For step three, all variables were entered into the multiple regression equation, Multiple $r=.47$. Thus, codependence scores were strongly related to incidents of emotional abuse and, to a lesser extent, to sexual abuse. Once these variables were entered into the regression equation, parental alcoholism and physical abuse did not account for any of the remaining variance in codependence scores.

Discussion

The results of the study supported our hypothesis. Codependent characteristics were largely related to the abusive behaviors that are often associated with parental alcoholism, but not to alcoholism in general. Specifically, emotional abuse was strongly related to codependence. To a lesser extent, sexual abuse was also related to codependence. There was a modest relationship between codependence and parental alcohol abuse. However, once the effects of emotional and sexual abuse were removed, that relationship was no longer significant.

Contrary to popular thought, it appears that parental alcoholism is not always associated with abusive parenting practices. The correlations between parental alcoholism and emotional and physical abuse, although significant, were quite low. This may explain why many children of alcoholics do not display maladaptive levels of codependence. It is likely that the cases of parental alcohol abuse which come to the attention of practitioners represent the extremes on the abusive continuum. Since most writers in the field of codependence have based their theories upon their clinical experiences, it is not surprising that many appear to have overestimated the effects of alcoholism on codependent characteristics. By relying solely on a clinical population,

theorist may not recognize the mediating effects of other environmental variables that occur in conjunction with alcohol abuse.

Two major conclusions are supported by the present study. First, the more general experience of living with an alcoholic parent is not sufficient to produce codependent characteristics. Rather, the development of codependence is associated with the more specific occurrences of parental abuse, emotional and physical. Therefore, not all children of alcoholics are at risk for developing this "disorder". Alcoholic parents who refrain from abusive behaviors do not appear to increase the risk of codependence in their children.

Second, codependent characteristics are not specific to children of alcoholics. Rather, children who are exposed to emotional and sexual abuse, with or without alcoholism, are the group who appear to be at the greatest risk for codependence. It is this group that is a more appropriate target for education and intervention.

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Table 1

Correlations between Codependence, Parental Alcohol Abuse and other forms of Abuse

	CdQ	CAST	Physical Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Emotional Abuse
CdQ	1.0	.18**	.27**	.26**	.44**
CAST			.18**	.08	.22**
Physical Abuse				.14*	.65**
Sexual Abuse					.22**

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

Table 2

Multiple Regression of Parental Alcohol Abuse, Emotional Abuse, Physical Abuse, and Sexual Abuse on Codependence Scores

			Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
variable	*M*	*SD*	Beta	Beta	Beta
Emotional Abuse	6.9	1.9	4.48	4.09	4.18
Sexual Abuse	.45	1.08		3.14	3.14
Physical Abuse	10	2.4			-.38
CAST	2.0	5.4			.35
R^2			.19**	.22**	.22**
R^2 increment			.19**	.03*	.00
F			49.5**	28.8**	15.0**

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$